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24th ID vets dedicate new Punchbowl monument to fallen comrades

By Sara Fishburn and Kevin Downey, U.S. Army Pacific, Public Affairs

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii -- Paying tribute to the heroics of fallen comrades whose motto was "First to Fight," 24th Infantry Division Association veterans held a memorial dedication ceremony July 25 at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu.

Dozens of veterans, including two former Prisoners of War and Task Force Smith survivors and their families, stood proud during the formal ceremony as a color guard comprised of U.S. Army, Pacific Soldiers rendered honors to salute the storied unit.

The 24th Infantry Division monument stands as a symbol of the legendary unit's prominent achievements in battle campaigns throughout the history of the United States, according to association president Gene Spicer, a retired brigadier general who spearheaded the unit's reunion and memorial ceremony.

"This is a tribute to the dauntless Soldiers of the Victory Division, and the principle by which they lived – 'First to Fight,'" said Spicer, who served in the division as a private first class from 1951-52 during the Korean Conflict. "We should never forget the contributions of this unit to the American way of life, for these Soldiers knew all too clearly that freedom isn't free."

Soldiers assigned to the 94th Army Air Missile Defense Command and 30th Signal Battalion provided the color guard and rifle salute. Chaplain Richard Savage, of the 8th Theater Sustainment Command, provided the memorial prayer while Army and Marine buglers played echo taps.

The 24th Infantry Division, also known as the Hawaiian Division, or Pineapple Division, was established at Schofield Barracks on Oahu on March 1, 1921, to provide land defense of the Hawaiian territory.

The unit earned the nickname "Victory Division" in WWII for their sterling combat record without defeat. The division fought in five campaigns in the Pacific, the most engaged in by any U.S. division in the Pacific during the Second World War.

It was among the first units to take up arms against Imperial Japanese forces Dec. 7, 1941, and the first to engage the North Korean aggressor nine years later. As part of the Army's reduction to a ten-division force, the 24th Infantry Division was inactivated Feb. 15, 1996.

The 24th Infantry Division memorial is situated next to the 5th Regimental Combat Team's monument along the Memorial Walk. The tree-lined pathway overlooking the Pacific Ocean is lined with a variety of memorials that honor America's veterans from various organizations. There are more than 65 such memorials throughout the national shrine, most commemorating Soldiers of 20th-century wars, including those killed at Pearl Harbor.

The 24th Infantry Division monument consists of a glass replica of the unit insignia -- a green taro leaf highlighted in yellow on top of a red circle -- displayed on a flowing iron ribbon. The plaque is anchored by a block of marble donated to the association by the Rock of Ages stone quarry in Vermont.

According to 24th ID veteran Daniel J. Rickert, three hibiscus flowers on the plaque represent the three major wars the unit fought in -- WWII, the Korean Conflict, and Vietnam. The Hawaii state flowers also represent where the division was founded. Acorns and an oak leaf depicted on the bottom of the plaque represent strength and renewal, he said.

During the ceremony, Rickert asked audience members and fellow veterans to pray for their brothers-in-arms, many of whom he said were too frail or ill to travel to Hawaii for the reunion to witness the dedication ceremony.

"Our comrades fought and died for our country," he said. "They deserve your prayers. May God bless our past Soldiers and our current Soldiers who are on duty around the world today."

CUTLINES:

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24th Infantry Division Association president Gene Spicer, a retired brigadier general, pays tribute to his fallen comrades July 25 at the new memorial in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. U.S. Army, Pacific photo by Kevin Downey

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Soldiers assigned to the 94th Army Air Missile Defense Command and 30th Signal Battalion provided the color guard and rifle salute at the 24th Infantry Division Association memorial dedication ceremony July 25 at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. U.S. Army, Pacific photo by Kevin Downey.